



## Athlete Profile (National)

### Gary Pearson – A Golden Spirit



*One is silver and the other's gold.* For one veteran, these are not simply the lyrics to an old childhood song. In 2006, Gary Pearson a 52-year-old Coast Guard veteran, wheeled away with a gold medal in quad rugby and a silver medal in slalom at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games. This Vietnam era veteran knows, however, that winning is not the most important aspect of the annual sports event for athletic veterans who use wheelchairs, like him. In fact, it is specifically that attitude that made him a big winner at the 2004 National Veterans Wheelchair Games, where his award-winning attitude won Pearson the Spirit of the Games Award.

Pearson was recommended for the honor not only because of his knowledge of the rules, athletic performance and command of his events, but also for his sincerity and fairness in sharing that knowledge with fellow competitors. He is genuinely interested in their competitions, even if he is not involved in the sport himself. Each year, the Spirit of the Games Award goes to only one veteran, recognizing athletic excellence, sportsmanship and strength of character. His selection was a good one.

Vigorous competition is not new to Gary Pearson, whose first encounter with wheelchair competition was at National Wheelchair Athletic Association events where he won locally, regionally and then, nationally. Later, he became involved with the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and began his relationship with the National Veterans Wheelchair Games. Pearson, who most admires his late father's athletic abilities, knows the power of a good outlook. His athleticism may have been inherited, but his advice to others is all his own, encouraging all participants to "keep your head up, no matter how you do or place."

A quadriplegic, Pearson was injured in an automobile accident when the driver of a vehicle went to sleep at the wheel. Reflecting on what it was like when he was newly injured in the 1970s, he said, "We were so limited back then. It was difficult to find accommodations for wheelchairs. It's great to see the progress that has been made." He acknowledges that it hasn't always been easy. "We've had to fight to become normal citizens again."

An active citizen indeed, Pearson, who receives health care services at the VA Puget Sound Healthcare System in Seattle, continues to serve as President of the Northwest PVA Chapter based in Burien, Washington. Aside from his PVA work, Pearson stays busy training with about 20 of his fellow team members who will travel to Milwaukee, Wisconsin this June to compete in the 27<sup>th</sup> National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

"We [the athletes] all have something in common, and being in a chair isn't the most obvious factor – we all just love sports," he said. "The other commonality is that whether you are newly injured or have been injured for decades, you're not alone when you're at the Games. You don't stand out."

All things considered though, Gary Pearson *does* stand out – not because of his injury, but instead for his inspiring personality. There is nothing silver or bronze about his heart or his spirit. Both are pure gold.